

## **Esther Discusses "Only 10 HCPs, But a 2-Suited Hand: *What's a Dealer to Do?*"**

**Bruce Thompson**

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**Esther:** Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss "Only 10 HCPs, but a 2-Suited Hand: *What's a Dealer to Do?*"

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today.

**Esther:** D\*\*n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

**Bruce:** Errr, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, why don't you first talk a bit about the fact that unlikely, or even extremely unlikely, things can happen at the bridge table?

**Esther:** Well, of course, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*. On this point, I very much like to quote my fellow Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), Walt Disney, who was always very fond of saying with respect to bridge:

**"Miracles happen every day in life,  
But ALSO at the Bridge Table!!!"**

**Bruce:** Oh, my goodness, Est... I mean, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, apropos of Walt's, errr... I mean Mr. Disney's saying, let's presume that you as Dealer sitting NORTH were dealt the following Hand. Would you open by bidding something other than PASS? And if so, what?

NORTH (10)  
S: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2  
H: --  
D: A K Q J 9  
C: --

**Esther:** Well, certainly bridge miracles can happen, my *Simpering Simpleton!* And NORTH here does hold only 10 HCPs. But I will open the bidding with this Hand every single day of the week, and twice or three times on any day containing the letters "D,A,Y"!!!

**Bruce:** But my goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! NORTH holds only 10, not even 12, and certainly not 13 HCPs. Aren't you *required* to hold 13 HCPs sitting first as Dealer to make a 1-level Suit bid???

**Esther:** Well, my *Bodacious Bupkus*, my friend, Walt, also offered the following equally famous bridge admonition:

**"NO! NO!! NO!!! H\*\*\*, NO!!!!!"**

BOTH (1) HCPs and (3) card counts are important when bidding either (1) Suit contracts or (2) **NT**. But Walt also wisely said:

1. **HCPs** are very important when bidding **NT** contracts, because HCPs imply "stoppers" when playing a **NT** contract, and Opponents not then "running" a long Suit. Declarer holding BOTH (1) HCPs and (2) a "flat" or "rectangular" Hand together implies Declarer holding "stoppers" in ALL 4 Suits!
2. **Card Counts** are what are important in Suit contracts, and much less so HCPs!!!! This was the *underlying revelation* revealed by Larry Cohen in his **HUGELY important** 1992 book, To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks. The "**Law of Total Tricks**" says:

**"Even in a competitive auction, your Partnerships about 85% of the time will make a Suit contract set at or less than the Number of Cards you hold in the Trump Suit minus 6. For example, if your Partnership holds 10 Spades, you are pretty much going to make a 10 - 6 = 4-**

**level Game contract, pretty much independent of point counts!"**

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, are there any other respected bridge Life Masters, other than you, Walt, and Larry, who argue that Partners should focus on Card Counts, and not HCPs, when bidding Suit contracts?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, of course. For example, Marty Bergen, who played frequently with Larry Cohen in winning a couple of dozen North American Bridge Championships, and invented the "**Rule of 20**", "**Bergen Limit Raises**", and the "**DONT**" convention, also said it all *IN THE TITLES* of 2 of his many best-selling bridge books: Points Schmoints! and More Points Schmoions!

**Bruce:** OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, anybody else?

**Esther:** Well, my *Dandruff-ridden Dufus*, a Grand Life Master player in the Savannah Bridge Club, whom many players called "Yoda", says it all in a quite straightforward manner:

**"Points are for No Trump!!! Period!"**

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, I know of one Partner who ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS focuses on HCPs even when bidding Suit contracts. Any thoughts about this?

**Esther:** Well, that's very sad, Bruce. Only a Saint could put up with this nonsense. There is an old saying, "*You can't teach an Old Dog new tricks!*" But really the saying should instead be:

**"You cannot 'unlearn' an Old Dog 'tricks' that he learned from many years of social bridge! And the damage of too many years of learning bad habits cannot be undone easily, or probably ever!"**

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, back to NORTH's Hand. Would you bid? If so, what?

NORTH (10)  
S: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2  
H: --  
D: A K Q J 9  
C: --

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, *EVERY SINGLE TIME* I am bidding, and I am Dealer, or I am not Dealer but all previous Hands have PASSEd, in ANY Seat, I *EVERY SINGLE TIME* compute the Number required by Marty Bergen's "**Rule of 20**": I add up (1) the number of HCPs I hold, and (2) the number of cards in my longest 2 Suits. If this Total is **20** or more, I open the bidding with a Suit contract bid, *EVERY, SINGLE, TIME, ALWAYS!*

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is the thinking underlying Bergen's "**Rule of 20**"?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, quite simply, "flat" Hands play well in **NT** contracts, but 2-Suited Hands play VERY WELL in Suit contracts! Bergen's "**Rule of 20**" rewards holding, and bidding, a 2-Suited Hand by making a Suit contract bid when otherwise one would (erroneously) not do so! As Bergen notes in his GREAT, FABULOUS, WONDERFUL little "pocket book"<sup>1</sup>, so-called because the book is small enough to fit in your pocket, pocket posh: tips for bridge players:

"5-5 Come Alive. Any [H]and with 5-5 distribution has great potential. This is especially true when you have good [S]uits, and really gets exciting once you find a fit." (p. 17)

**Two** additional things are worth emphasizing: (1) a 2-Suited Hand holding 5-4 or 4-5 Suits is *also* pretty good!, and (2) holding 2 long Suits MASSIVELY increases your probabilities of finding an 8-card "fit" with Partner!!! As noted in the "**Probabilities Section**" of the "Esther Bridge Lessons", if you are 2-Suited 5-4, the probability of your Partnership finding an 8+ card fit is **74%**. If you are 2-Suited 5-5, the probability of you finding an 8+ card fit with Partner is **84%**!

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<sup>1</sup> You can find this book available on the Internet for less than **\$10!**

**Bruce:** Is there *anything else* that would impel you to bid when holding this Hand?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I also always think about "**Quick Tricks**" when deciding whether to bid. I prefer playing a Spade contract with this Hand, and not a Diamond contract, because a Major yields more MatchPoints per Trick! Even if Partner holds a Spade void, with 5 Spades out the much more likely split is 3-2, so even in that case I am going to lose only 3 Tricks, and thus make a **4S** contract!

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, would you open with a **4S** bid?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, if I open **1D**, and my LHO **PASS**es, Partner will most likely bid **1H**, but could do so with few HCPs, and so the information may not be very helpful. So I think I would open the bidding with **1S**, and then see what other intel I can pick up later in the auction from either Partner or Opponents. With this Hand, and holding the "King of Suits", Spades, I can always come in later with a jump bid to **4S**. Opponents and/or Partner are **VERY** likely to bid, because I hold only 10 HCPs, and the remaining 30 HCPs have got to be somewhere.

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, here is the Hand held by EAST:

NORTH (10)  
**S:** 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2  
**H:** --  
**D:** A K Q J 9  
**C:** --

EAST (18)  
**S:** A  
**H:** A K 9 6  
**D:** T 7 5 3  
**C:** A K T 2

What should EAST bid?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, and EAST holds (1) **13+** HCPs, because  $18 > 13!$ , (2) shortness (the Ace!) in NORTH's Spades, and (3) no 5-card Suit, but 4 of each of the 3 unbid Suits! This is as natural and obvious a holding

demanding a "Takeout/'Demand' DOUBLE" as you will ever see!

**Bruce:** Well, OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. After EAST DOUBLES, what should SOUTH do, holding the following Hand?

NORTH (10)  
S: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2  
H: --  
D: A K Q J 9  
C: --

EAST (18)  
S: A  
H: A K 9 6  
D: T 7 5 3  
C: A K T 2

SOUTH (9)  
S: K J T  
H: Q T 8  
D: 8 2  
C: Q J 5 4 3

**Esther:** Well, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*, SOUTH can support NORTH's Spades, but only has enough HCPs for a "constructive" raise showing **8-10** HCPs. I think the obvious bid is a "Support RE-DOUBLE"!!! If WEST PASSES, NORTH can PASS, and if EAST also PASSES, NORTH can play a **1S** Game contract! Of course, either WEST or EAST will likely eventually take the DOUBLE "out" with some other bid! In this auction, NORTH will know that a Spade Slam contract is not reasonable, but a **4S** contract is makeable, and eventually NORTH will put everybody out of their misery by bidding **4S**. With any luck, EAST will again DOUBLE, and NORTH can RE-DOUBLE if he wishes to do so!

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what if a player, after all this discussion, still wishes to be an "HCP Counter" or "Points Obsessed"?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, such players could be just exactly as "gifted" as "*Clever Hans the Wonder Horse*"<sup>2</sup>, who was

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about "Clever Hans the Wonder Horse", see Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clever\\_Hans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clever_Hans)

*QUITE* famous roughly 115 years ago in the very early 1900s. The horse, Hans, would answer questions, such as "If the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the month comes on a Tuesday, what is the date of the following Friday?" Hans answered by tapping his hoof the appropriate number of times! So, if your Partner, or you, want to be equally as smart as "*Clever Hans*", your Partner, or you, can then become known as "*Clever Hans the Wonder Horse of Bridge*"! Counting only the HCPs with your hoof! It's all good! You'll be famous, just as was "*Clever Hans*"!